

Elim Chan: Bartók, a New Oboe Concerto and Rachmaninoff's Symphonic Dances

Sunday, February 8, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Elim Chan, conductor · Olivier Stankiewicz, oboe

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BARTÓK 1881–1945 <i>Dance Suite, BB 86</i>	17'
2	MATTHEWS b. 1946 <i>Oboe Concerto (world premiere, LSO commission)</i>	20'
3	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Symphonic Dances, Op. 45</i>	36'
TOTAL MUSIC		73'

Béla Bartók

17 minutes

1881–1945
Dance Suite, BB 86

THE COMPOSER

Béla Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, then in the Kingdom of Hungary (today Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), and grew up to become one of the towering figures of twentieth-century music, and one of its great explorers. Trained as a pianist and composer at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, he was a formidable virtuoso who might have made his career at the keyboard alone. Instead, in the first decade of the century, he turned to the villages of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, later reaching as far as Algeria, recording peasant songs on wax cylinders and laying, with his friend Zoltán Kodály, the foundations of modern ethnomusicology. That fieldwork was not antiquarianism: the irregular metres, modal scales, and percussive vitality of the music he gathered passed directly into his own language, giving it a flinty rhythmic drive and an earthy modernity unlike anything in the Austro-German tradition he otherwise revered. Bartók loathed fascism: after 1933 he refused to give concerts in Nazi Germany and broke with his publisher there. As Hungary slid toward alliance with Hitler, he emigrated to the United States in 1940, settling in New York. The American years were hard, with failing health, financial anxiety and a sense of exile, yet they produced

the radiant Concerto for Orchestra (1943) and the Third Piano Concerto heard tonight. He died of complications of leukaemia in New York on 26 September 1945, his Third Piano Concerto all but finished on his desk.

ABOUT THE WORK

Bartók's Dance Suite is one of his most accessible and joyful orchestral works, a six-movement celebration of folk music written for a grand civic occasion. In 1923 the Hungarian capital marked the fiftieth anniversary of the union of the three towns of Buda, Pest and Óbuda into a single city, Budapest, and the municipal authorities commissioned festive works from the country's three leading composers: Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi, Zoltán Kodály and Bartók. The result was a memorable gala concert on 19 November 1923, at which Dohnányi conducted his Festival Overture, Kodály unveiled his great *Psalmus Hungaricus*, and Bartók contributed this Dance Suite. Of the three it was Bartók's piece that travelled fastest and furthest, quickly establishing itself across Europe and becoming one of his most-performed scores.

By 1923 Bartók had spent nearly two decades as a pioneering collector of folk music, travelling with a wax-cylinder phonograph through the villages of Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and even North Africa, recording and transcribing thousands of peasant melodies. The Dance Suite distils that lifelong research, but in a special way: rather than quoting actual folk tunes, Bartók invented his own melodies in the spirit of the various traditions he had studied: Hungarian, Romanian, Arab and a kind of imaginary 'universal' peasant idiom. He described the work simply as 'the result of my researches and love for folk music.' The suite's six short movements run together without a break, linked by a gentle, songful ritornello, a recurring 'Hungarian' refrain that returns between the dances and finally helps gather everything into a triumphant close.

The writing is vivid, earthy and superbly orchestrated, ranging from heavy, stamping dances to delicate, exotic woodwind arabesques. It is Bartók at his most outgoing and colourful (rhythmically driving, harmonically pungent, but always rooted in the dance) and makes a brilliant, high-energy opening to the concert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the way the six movements flow into one another as a continuous span, and for the gentle, lyrical ritornello, a relaxed, slightly nostalgic 'Hungarian' tune that keeps returning

between the dances like a familiar face in a crowd. It is the thread that binds the whole suite together and brings it home at the end.

Within that frame, savour the contrast of the dances themselves: the heavy, lurching, almost primitive stamp of the opening; the swirling, exotic woodwind writing with its sinuous, 'Arab'-flavoured arabesques and snapping percussion; quicker, scurrying folk-dance episodes; and a broad, warm slow section before the finale. Listen for Bartók's brilliant orchestral colour (earthy low brass and bassoons, chattering clarinets, glinting percussion) and for the relentless rhythmic energy that drives the music. The suite gathers all its ideas into a jubilant final movement that recalls earlier themes and ends in a blaze: a concise, exhilarating tour of Bartók's folk-inspired imagination.

Colin Matthews

20 minutes

b. 1946

Oboe Concerto (world premiere, LSO commission)

THE COMPOSER

Colin Matthews (born in London in 1946) is one of Britain's most distinguished living composers, OBE, noted above all for his large-scale orchestral music. He read classics at Nottingham University before studying composition there with Arnold Whittall and privately with Nicholas Maw, and took a doctorate on Mahler at the University of Sussex. From 1964 to 1975 he worked alongside his brother David Matthews and the musicologist Deryck Cooke on the celebrated performing version of Mahler's unfinished Tenth Symphony, and he has long been involved with the Britten Estate and the Holst Foundation. A prolific arranger as well as composer (his orchestrations of Debussy's *Préludes* are widely played), he served as the LSO's Associate Composer from 1992 to 1999 and later held the same post with the Hallé. He is Prince Consort Professor at the Royal College of Music and the founder of the contemporary-music label NMC. His music combines a rigorous craftsmanship with a strong sense of colour, drama and line.

ABOUT THE WORK

This concert gives the world premiere of a brand-new Oboe Concerto by Colin Matthews, written specially for the London Symphony Orchestra's own Principal Oboe, Olivier Stankiewicz, and commissioned by the orchestra. As a first performance it comes without the cushion of familiarity that surrounds the Bartók and Rachmaninoff on either side of it: there are no famous recordings to recall, no received wis-

dom about how it ‘should’ sound. That is part of the occasion: an audience hearing a major new work for the first time, brought to life by the very player for whom it was conceived.

Matthews is among the most experienced and respected orchestral composers in Britain, and he knows the LSO intimately; he was its Associate Composer through the 1990s. He also knows the solo concerto as a form, having written concertos and concertante works across his career. The oboe is a particularly characterful solo instrument: penetrating yet plaintive, capable of both pastoral lyricism and quick, agile brilliance, with a singing tone that can cut through a full orchestra or melt into the softest woodwind blend. Writing a concerto for a player of Stankiewicz’s calibre, a prize-winning virtuoso admired for both his beauty of tone and his technical command, gives a composer the freedom to explore the full expressive and athletic range of the instrument.

Because the piece is new, the most honest thing to say about its detail is that the score will speak for itself on the night. What can be said is that Matthews’s orchestral music typically combines clarity and craftsmanship with a strong sense of drama, line and instrumental colour, and that a concerto for principal oboe written for one’s own orchestra is, in effect, a portrait of a player and a partnership. It sits at the heart of the programme as its point of discovery, framed by two twentieth-century masterpieces.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Approach this one with open, curious ears: you are among the first people ever to hear it. Without recordings to anticipate, simply follow the soloist: listen for how Matthews uses the oboe’s distinctive voice, by turns singing and plangent, nimble and brilliant, and for the conversation between the solo line and the orchestra around it.

Listen for the things a composer can do with a concerto: passages where the oboe sings long, expressive melodies above the orchestra; quicker, more virtuosic writing that shows off the soloist’s agility; moments where the solo instrument is set against, echoed by or absorbed into the orchestral woodwind; and the overall shape of the piece: how it builds, contrasts and resolves across its span of around twenty minutes. Above all, listen to Olivier Stankiewicz, the player for whom every note was written, and to the sense of occasion in hearing a new work step into the world for the first time.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873–1943

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism, a composer of sweeping, melancholy lyricism and a piano virtuoso of legendary gifts. His early career was nearly derailed by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, which plunged him into a years-long depression; he recovered, with the help of therapy, to write the hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and went on to create the works for which he is loved: the piano concertos, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, the symphonies, the songs and the great piano pieces. After the Russian Revolution he left his homeland forever, settling eventually in the United States and supporting himself largely as a touring concert pianist, composing far less but with undiminished mastery. His music's combination of long-breathed melody, rich harmony and deep, nostalgic emotion has made it among the most beloved of all.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Symphonic Dances are Rachmaninoff's last completed work, a glorious valediction from the great Russian Romantic, written in 1940 when he was sixty-seven and living in exile in the United States. It is the only major piece he composed entirely in America, sketched on Long Island, at an estate in Centerport where he spent the summer, and dedicated to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, who gave the premiere in January 1941. Though cast as a set of three 'dances,' it is in effect a late symphony: large in scale, symphonic in argument, and shot through with the autumnal melancholy, the long-breathed melody and the obsession with death and remembrance that mark Rachmaninoff's final years.

The work is haunted by self-quotation and by the plainchant *Dies irae* ('Day of Wrath'), the medieval chant of the dead that recurs across Rachmaninoff's output like a signature. Most movingly, in the first movement he quotes (quietly, in the strings near the close) the main theme of his own First Symphony, the work whose catastrophic 1897 premiere had nearly destroyed him as a young man. Few listeners in 1940 could have recognised the reference, so this is a private act of memory, a man making peace with his own past. The finale stages a titanic struggle between the *Dies irae* (death) and a quotation from his own All-Night Vigil (resurrection); at the point where the Vigil theme finally triumphs, Rachmaninoff wrote the word 'Alliluya' in the score. It is a profound and personal farewell.

The orchestration is the most brilliant and original of his career, including a famous, unexpected alto saxophone solo in the first movement, a smoky, nostalgic voice unlike anything else in his music. The work crowns the all-orchestral programme with Rachmaninoff at his most masterly: richly Romantic, rhythmically incisive, and emotionally searching.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first dance (*Non allegro*) drives forward on a terse, march-like rhythm, but at its heart is one of Rachmaninoff's most beautiful inspirations: a long, yearning melody given to a solo alto saxophone over gentle woodwinds; listen for that unmistakable, melancholy voice. Then, in the hushed coda, listen for the serene string melody that glows briefly before the end: that is the self-quotation from his First Symphony, his secret backward glance.

The second dance is a waltz, but an uneasy, shadowy one: an elegant, swaying triple-time dance repeatedly disturbed by ominous brass fanfares and a sense of menace beneath the glamour, like a ball haunted by ghosts. The finale is the dramatic core: listen for the grim, chant-like *Dies irae* motif stalking through the music, set against the surging, life-affirming theme drawn from his *All-Night Vigil*. The two ideas battle across the movement until the 'resurrection' theme breaks through in blazing triumph, driving to a tremendous, bell-clanging close, the final affirmation of a composer signing off his life's work with thanks. Listen, too, throughout, for the dazzling orchestration: the biting rhythms, the glittering percussion, the rich strings and the inventive, surprising instrumental colours of Rachmaninoff's last and in some ways most modern masterpiece.

Tonight's artists

Olivier Stankiewicz *oboe*

Colin Matthews's Oboe Concerto was written for Olivier Stankiewicz, the LSO's own Principal Oboe, and he gives its world premiere here: a piece conceived from the first note for his sound and his artistry. Celebrated for the beauty and refinement of his tone and for a technique honed in international competition, Stankiewicz is not merely the soloist but the work's originating voice, stepping out from the section he leads to introduce a new concerto written for him.

Olivier Stankiewicz has been Principal Oboe of the London Symphony Orchestra since 2015 and is a professor at the Royal College of Music. He won First Prize at the International Oboe Competition in Japan and was selected by the Young Classical Artists Trust in 2016. He has appeared as a soloist with orchestras including the Orchestre de Lille and the Tokyo Sinfonietta, and has commissioned and premiered works by Benjamin Attahir, Tonia Ko and Laurent Durupt. Admired for the refinement and beauty of his tone and for his technical command, he is active as a soloist, chamber musician and recording artist as well as orchestral principal, and the natural dedicatee of Colin Matthews's new concerto, written expressly for him.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings**

Max Harrison, Continuum 2006

Max Harrison's life of Rachmaninoff covers the American years in which he wrote the *Symphonic Dances*, his last completed work.

ACCESSIBLE **Bartók**

Paul Griffiths, Oxford University Press 1988

Paul Griffiths's concise study of Bartók's life and music, including the *Dance Suite* he wrote for the 1923 anniversary of the union of Buda and Pest.

DEEPER **Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music**

Sergei Bertensson, Jay Leyda, Indiana University Press 2001

A documentary biography built from Rachmaninoff's letters and memories of those who knew him, with material on the *Symphonic Dances*.

SOURCES

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8. Olivier Stankiewicz, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/bio/olivier-stankiewicz/>
9. Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780826493125>
10. Bartók, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780460125604>
11. Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780253214218>



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Version 3, 30 September 2026